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of
LINCOLN'S YOUTH

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LINCOLN NATIONAL LIFE FOUNDATION

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The Slavery Atmosphere of Lincoln's Youth*

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The Proclamation of Emancipation was one of the most far-reaching state papers ever issued. It not only liberated immediately four million black men held in bondage, but it sounded a new and significant note in democratic government. The seventieth anniversary of the proclamation, which occurred on January 1, 1933, has invited further study of this writing and the factors which prompted it.

This proclamation, issued as a military necessity, was not the result of consultation and deliberation by a special commission or the reaction of the president's cabinet. It was the creation of Abraham Lincoln, himself, and he advised his cabinet he wished to bear the entire responsibility for introducing so drastic a measure. Carpenter, the artist, gives this version of the story in Lincoln's own words: "Without consultation with or the knowledge of the cabinet, I prepared the original draft of the proclamation . . . I said to the cabinet that I had resolved upon this step and had not called them together to ask their advice, but to lay the subject matter before them."¹ No document ever issued carried with it more of the signer himself than this guarantee of freedom for all men. The peculiar personal aspect of this writing invites a study of the factors which contributed to the development of a consciousness which found expression in the emancipation of the negro race.

Lincoln's viewpoint about the moral aspect of slavery has been considerably warped by the false assumptions drawn from his statements in the famous open letter to Horace Greeley. This letter had but one purpose, and that was the assuring of the people that, as president of the United States, his paramount objective was to save the Union at any cost. His references to freeing none, some, or all the negroes he indicates clearly would become his official duty, if, in carrying out any of these three proposals, the Union could be saved.

That Lincoln foresaw this letter might be open to a wrong interpretation of his own personal desire with respect to slavery, is indicated by the closing paragraph of the message to Greeley, which says:

"I have here stated my purpose according to my view of official duty; and I intend no modification of my oft-expressed personal wish that all men everywhere could be free."

It is clear that in the Emancipation Proclamation Lincoln not only performed his "official duty" by freeing all the slaves, but this act also happened to coincide with his "oft-expressed personal wish."

In a letter written in 1854 he said: "I suppose my opposition to the principle of slavery is as strong as any member of the Republican party."² In the famous Peoria speech of the same year he remarked with reference

*Paper read before the annual Lincoln's Birthday Assembly of the Chicago Historical Society on February 12, 1933.

1. Carpenter, *Six Months in the White House*, p. 4.
2. Letter to Codding, November 27, 1854.

to slavery: "I hate it because of the monstrous injustice of slavery itself." In Chicago on July 10, 1858, he said: "I have always hated slavery, I think, as much as any abolitionist."

This Chicago utterance, which specifically states that Lincoln had "always hated slavery," should encourage us to investigate conditions existing in the community where the emancipator himself received his first impressions of the system. There may be those who are in agreement with the admonition sounded by Nicolay and Hay in their monumental work which concludes:

"There have been several ingenious attempts to show the origin and occasion of Mr. Lincoln's anti-slavery convictions. They seem to us an idle waste of labor. These sentiments came with the first awakening of his mind and conscience, and were roused into active life and energy by the sight of fellow-creatures in chains on an Ohio River steamboat, and on a wharf at New Orleans."³

Inasmuch as this inquiry attempts to go back to a date long before the birth of Lincoln, it may also be looked upon as an "idle waste of labor." While Nicolay and Hay were correct in stating that Lincoln's anti-slavery sentiments came "with the first awakening of his mind and conscience," it appears from evidence now available that these sentiments were aroused much earlier than has been believed.

Three years before his visit in 1840 to Joshua Speed of Kentucky, when he saw the slaves in chains, mentioned by Nicolay and Hay, he had joined with Dan Stone in a protest which he signed and laid before the Legislature of Illinois. One paragraph in the memorandum, written in the third person, follows: "They believe that the institution of slavery is founded on both injustice and bad policy."

Lincoln's observations of the slave markets in New Orleans also occurred much earlier than Nicolay and Hay have concluded. On January 9, 1860, Lincoln wrote a letter to Alexander Stevens, in which he said, "When a boy I went to New Orleans on a flat boat and there I saw slavery and slave markets as I have never seen them in Kentucky, and I heard worse of the Red River plantations."

It is the contents of a letter which Abraham Lincoln wrote to A. G. Hodges of Frankfort, Kentucky, on April 4, 1864, which justify the assumption that Lincoln's opinions about slavery were formulated very early in life and became a dominant force in his development. He wrote: "I am naturally anti-slavery. If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. I cannot remember when I did not so think and feel."

This written testimonial warrants at least three definite conclusions: First, if Lincoln was anti-slavery by nature, his parents were of that persuasion; second, if from his first recollection he had thought slavery wrong, some influences, surrounding him very early in life, must have continued to cultivate this opinion; third, if he concluded in his early life that nothing could be wrong if slavery was not, he must have always considered it a great moral menace. These three propositions so clearly set forth in this letter will invite our consideration under the following

3. Nicolay and Hay, *Abraham Lincoln, a History*, Vol. 1, p. 74.

captions: The attitude of Lincoln's parents towards slavery, Lincoln's childhood contact with slavery, and Lincoln's reaction towards the moral issue of slavery.

I. THE ATTITUDE OF LINCON'S PARENTS TOWARDS SLAVERY

The primary source of influence in a child's life may be found in the environment created by his parents and the opinions expressed by those who live in the same home with him. This fact makes it quite necessary to study the attitude of Lincoln's parents toward slavery.

The Hedges letter, which affirms the anti-slavery stand of his parents, is confirmed further by another statement which Lincoln prepared for Scripps in 1860. With reference to the migration of the Lincoln family from Kentucky to Indiana in 1816, when Abraham was but eight years of age, he wrote, "This removal was partly on account of slavery."

Thomas Lincoln, father of Abraham Lincoln, came from Virginia to Kentucky in 1782, when he was six years of age. Four years later Thomas Lincoln's father was massacred by the Indians at a point near Louisville, Kentucky, in Jefferson County. Two exhibits discovered in the Jefferson County Court House, bearing dates about the same time as the pioneer's massacre, will suggest the divergence of opinion about slavery then being registered in the very community where Thomas Lincoln was living when a boy.

A negro slave named Tom, property of Robert Daniel, was arrested and tried for felony. The testimony revealed that he had stolen two and three-quarters yards of cambric and some ribbon and thread, the property of Mary Patten. The court did "sentence the said negro, Tom, by reason thereof to be taken back to the jail of said county and from thence to the place of execution, and then be hung by the neck until he be dead, dead, dead."⁴

This severe punishment for so trivial an offense finds its counterpart in a document bearing a date one year later. It reveals the attitude towards slavery of many pioneers who had taken up their residence in the western country. This document, signed by Philip Graham, follows:

"Being conscious to myself that the practice of holding slaves in perpetual slavery is repugnant to the Golden Law of God and the unalienable rights of mankind as well as the very principle of the late glory of our revolution, which has taken place in America wherefore for these good and just causes, after weighty consideration the said Philip Graham do for myself and heirs and administrators and every one of them, emancipate, set free, and discharge all my negroes hereafter mentioned . . . "⁵

It may be said without fear of contradiction that the principles which inspired the revolution eventually brought on the irrepressible conflict. For fully seventy-five years before the open hostilities of 1861, differences of opinion caused men to clash about the political and moral issues

4. Jefferson County Court Order Book No. 2, p. 32.

5. Jefferson County Court Power of Attorney Register, p. 243.

involved in slavery. The Ordinance of 1784, introduced by Thomas Jefferson, which looked forward to the freedom of slaves; and the Ordinance of 1787, which advocated the non-extension of slavery, were hotly and bitterly contested. Thomas Lincoln, born in 1776, literally grew up with the slavery controversy in America.

Both of the parents of the president must have seen much of slavery in Washington County, Kentucky, where they were living before their marriage. Richard Berry, Sr., with whom Nancy Hanks made her home, listed three slaves in 1797. After his death it appears that his son, Edward, directed the affairs of the estate, and tradition claims that Nancy continued to live with the widow Berry and her son, Edward. In 1806, the year Nancy Hanks was married, Edward listed five slaves for taxation.⁶

Thomas Lincoln's brother, Mordecai, acquired a slave in 1803, about the time Thomas left Washington County. We have this testimony of President Lincoln with reference to his father, "before he was grown he passed a year as a hired hand with his Uncle Isaac, on Watauga, a branch of the Holston River."⁷ It is likely that here Thomas Lincoln got his first close contact with the slavery system as it existed in the more Southern states. It is not known just how many slaves were owned by Isaac Lincoln at the time Thomas Lincoln was there, but when Isaac's widow died in 1834, forty-three slaves were listed in the inventory of her estate. Another Thomas Lincoln, for whom the president's father was named, and a brother of Isaac, was also a slave holder, having as many as six black men in his possession at one time. There is no dependable evidence that the father of Thomas Lincoln was an owner of slaves, and the inventory of his estate does not list any.

While it must be recognized from the data available that most of the slaves in Kentucky had good homes, it was always the exceptional case which would be remembered longest and cause the most comment adverse to slavery. An incident occurred in the community where both Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks were living at the time, the details of which must have been known to them.

A certain man had leased a slave to a neighbor who, during the period he was in possession of the leasee, brutally beat him. The owner of the slave brought suit for damages against the man who hired the negro for so mutilating the slave as to greatly reduce the market value of his property. Many witnesses were called to testify to the severity of the whipping resulting from the slave having in his possession "A ball of soap" which it was alleged he had stolen. The evidence revealed, however, that the soap had been given to the slave by the wife of the man who administered the beating.

One who reads the testimony in this case will not question the terrible brutality with which the slave was handled, nor can one fail to observe that the beating was administered for a supposed trivial offense which after all the negro did not commit. The moral phase of the whole

6. Washington County Tax List, 1806.

7. Autobiography prepared for Scripps.

proceeding, however, seems to have been given no consideration whatever. The only question involved was whether the slave, as a piece of property, had been damaged. The testimony of one witness very clearly illustrates the trend of the evidence:

Question by defendant—"What did you say when you saw the negro's back?"

Answer by deponent—"I said that I would not have had him scarred so for fifty pounds if he was my negro—no, not for one hundred pounds, though I did not consider that the negro was that much damaged."⁸

While Thomas Lincoln was living at Elizabethtown, Kentucky, in 1797, he may have come in contact with slavery in such a way that some very adverse impressions of the institution were registered in his mind. He was hired to help dig the raceway for a mill and was thrown in constant contact with slave labor employed for the same purpose. When pay day arrived and Thomas Lincoln received his wages he could not but have observed that the master from whom the slaves had been hired received the slaves' wages rather than the laborers themselves.⁹

As Thomas Lincoln had just reached the age of twenty-one at this time, which gave him some liberties of his own, surely, he must have been impressed by this system which prevented a certain class of men from profiting by their own labor. This injustice to the slaves paved the way for what later became known as the "Hired Time" system which was one of the most repulsive arrangements of all the contacts between master and slave.

Having made some very brief observations of incidents which may have influenced, more or less, the opinion of Lincoln's parents with respect to slavery during their younger days, we come to a more important consideration, namely: The actual home environment into which Abraham Lincoln came at birth. This approach will invite us to observe both the home and the community atmosphere in which Lincoln's parents moved at this time. The peculiar environment of the community in which the Lincoln cabin home stood was being created long before Abraham Lincoln was born. One must go back to the first religious organizations in the Lincoln neighborhood to learn the minds of the people who settled there.

When Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks were married in Washington County in 1806, they went immediately to Elizabethtown, in Hardin County, Kentucky, where Thomas Lincoln was employed. Two years later they moved twelve miles east to the farm where Abraham Lincoln was born. Before leaving Kentucky, they lived in another home about six miles north of the birthplace cabin. These residences were all in the same part of old Hardin County.

There was no community in America, west of the Alleghany mountains, where a more bitter and consistent controversy had been waged over the slavery question, during the first forty years of the nation's existence, than within the small area comprising a radius of fifteen miles from the home site where the birth of Abraham Lincoln took place, and within which area the three Lincoln homes were located. While this

8. Washington County Circuit Court, Bundle "W", 1796.

9. Lincoln National Life Foundation, Haycraft Account Book, 1797.

affirmation may appear to be an exaggeration, records still extant and testimonies of unbiased witnesses will combine to bear out this well-authenticated assertion.

This community not only had been saturated with slavery arguments, pro and con, for twenty-five years before Abraham Lincoln's nativity, but, on the very date of his birth, the church within two miles of where he was born was in the midst of one of the most prolonged disturbances which had occurred in the congregation over the subject of slavery.

According to Spencer, the Baptist historian, "Slavery was by far the most fruitful of mischief of all the questions that agitated the Baptist churches of Kentucky from 1788 until 1820."¹⁰ One will observe that these dates cover the period in which Abraham Lincoln's father lived in Kentucky and the years of Abraham's own childhood.

The Baptists were the first religious body to establish themselves in the Kentucky country. By 1786, when Pioneer Abraham Lincoln died, they had twenty-five preachers in the field. Although there were clergymen representing other bodies scattered about, they did not exert much of an influence up to this time. Five of the first six Baptist preachers who came to the Kentucky country located in Hardin County in the very communities where Thomas Lincoln established his cabin homes. Two of these men, Barrett and Taylor, organized the church at Elizabethtown. Spencer says, "This was the first church gathered on Kentucky soil."¹¹ It was from Joseph Barrett, one of these men, that Joseph Hanks, presumably the great-grandfather of Abraham Lincoln, purchased his Kentucky land.

The same day, June 17, 1781, that the Severns Valley (Elizabethtown) church was constituted, John Gerrard was ordained as its preacher. He was, therefore, the first pastor of a Baptist church in the great valley lying between the Allegheny and Rocky Mountains. Gerrard is supposed to have been captured by the Indians in 1782. The church was constituted with eighteen members; and three slaves—Mark, Bambo, and Dinah—the property of Jacob Vanmeter, were in the original constitution. In 1782, another church was established on the South Fork of Nolin River, two miles south of where Lincoln was born. Not long after this a part of the Severns Valley membership began worshipping on the North Fork of Nolin River, two miles north of the Lincoln birthplace cabin site.

It might be said the slavery controversy began in the churches of the western country when Joshua Carman was called to preach at the Elizabethtown Church on June 23, 1787. The following year he formed the Rolling Fork church, which was about ten miles north of the place where Abraham Lincoln was born. Possibly the presence of both slaves and their masters in the same church may have had something to do with Carman's anti-slavery attitude, as the slaves were not granted all the privileges of the church. Spencer has this to say about Carman:

"He was regarded as a man of good ability, but becoming fanatical on the subject of slavery, he induced Rolling Fork Church to withdraw from the association and declare non-fellowship with all slave holders."

10. Spencer, *A History of Kentucky Baptists*, p. 484.

11. *Ibid.* pp. 16, 17, and 18.

It was Carman who prompted the Rolling Fork Church to put this question to the Salem association in 1789: "Is it lawful in the sight of God for a member of a Christian church to keep his fellow creatures in perpetual slavery?" The answer is recorded as follows: "The association judges it improper to enter into so important a question at this time." According to Spencer, this was "the first reference to the lawlessness of slavery in the churches of Kentucky" or he might have said the entire western country.¹²

An understudy of Joshua Carman succeeded him at Elizabethtown. His name was Josiah Dodge. He received a call by the church at a meeting held on October 22, 1791, and by 1792 he was preaching for three other churches: Rolling Fork, North Fork or Nolin, and Lick Creek, as well as the church at Elizabethtown. On January 23, 1796, the following question was presented to the Elizabethtown Church: "Is slavery oppression or not? The query being taken up was answered in the affirmative. It was oppression."

The next month, on February 27, this question was brought before the meeting: "Can we, as a church, have fellowship with those that hold the righteousness of perpetual slavery?" It was affirmed that "they could not."¹³

In the following paragraph Spencer reveals that it was at this time that "Joshua Carman and Josiah Dodge formed the first Emancipation church near Bardstown, Kentucky. The exact date or name it bore is not known, but it is supposed to have been the first organization of its kind in Kentucky."¹⁴

According to Tarrants' "History of Emancipation," Carmen and Dodge were the first preachers who separated from the Baptists on account of slavery. We have already observed that the very community which later became the birthplace of Abraham Lincoln was the stamping ground of the first Emancipation preacher west of the Allegheny Mountains. It was here that the question about the right and wrong of slavery was first put to the wilderness churches. Here the church for the first time declared non-fellowship with slave holders, and here there was organized the first Emancipation church in the western country.

II. LINCOLN'S CHILDHOOD CONTACTS WITH SLAVERY

The South Fork Church, which was located within two miles of Lincoln's birthplace, had experienced a long session of unrest which seemed to come to a climax just about the time of Abraham Lincoln's birth. It might be said that Lincoln was born in the very midst of a slavery controversy.

On June 28, 1806, a slave by the name of David was excluded for running away from his master. At the meeting on the sixteenth of August two members of the congregation were called upon by the church "to answer to the report that is in circulation for tying up a man and whipping him. They come forward and acknowledge it was a matter of fact."¹⁵

12. *Ibid*, p. 163.

13. *Severn's Valley Baptist Church Minute Book*.

14. *Spencer*, p. 163.

15. *South Fork Baptist Church Record Book*.

On December 19, 1807, in this South Fork Church and but a little more than a year before Abraham Lincoln was born, the minister of this congregation declared he was for emancipation. The church record copied verbatim follows:

"Brother Whitman declares himself 'amansapater' and requests the church to know whether they would wish him to attend them any longer or not. The church took it up and labored some time and agreed to postpone it till our next meeting."¹⁶

The church records do not indicate that this postponed meeting or any other business meeting was held until August 16 of the following year, when an entry records the names of fifteen members who "went out from the church on account of slavery." Among them was an uncle of Nancy Hanks Lincoln. Six months after the church split on the slavery question Abraham Lincoln was born in a cabin less than two miles away.

It was not until September, 1810, that the record book shows another assembly of the church members. During the monthly business meetings for the six following sessions the only record entered against the date inscribed is this significant note repeated in each instance: "The church met in peace." On the fourth Saturday in December, the following year, this entry appears: "Brother Dodson to request Brother William Whitman to attend our next meeting." This entry would make it appear as if the anti-slavery forces had been victorious, and it is confirmed by some of the members who withdrew on account of slavery, returning to the church.

Those who did not return joined with other anti-slavery advocates in forming the Little Mount Church, about three miles northeast of the birthplace cabin. This is the church with which the parents of Abraham Lincoln affiliated, although at this time they had moved from the birthplace farm to a point about six miles northeast or three miles beyond the Little Mount Church.

Here Abraham Lincoln heard his first sermons against slavery, by the eloquent minister, William Downs, who organized the church. Downs was brought up in the Rolling Fork Church, which took such an active part in anti-slavery movements. According to Spencer, the Baptist historian, Downs was "one of the most brilliant and fascinating orators in the Kentucky pulpit in his day . . . he was fond of controversy and engaged in several debates. His exceeding familiarity with the Scriptures, his ready wit, keen sarcasm, and brilliant oratory attracted the attention and won the admiration of the most intelligent and refined people within the limits of his acquaintance."¹⁷

Following Downs there came to the Little Mount Church as a minister, David Elkins. Jesse Friend, uncle of Nancy Hanks Lincoln, who with other members of the South Fork Church left it on account of slavery, was evidently a friend of Elkins, as indicated by the church record. While Elkins may not have been as brilliant an orator as Downs, he was without question an anti-slavery man. We might conclude that Abraham Lincoln's close association with the early church and her preachers must have made a very deep impression upon him.¹⁸

16. *Ibid.*

17. Spencer, p. 164.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 336.

As a small boy, Lincoln's direct contact with slavery may have been much like that of one whom the writer interviewed some years ago. He said, "I remember when I was a boy one night a gang of slaves was driven up to my father's house at dusk. The slave dealer wanted to put them in the barn for the night but father was afraid of fire and would not allow it. We had a big haystack outdoors and all the slaves, men, women, and children, were chained together and slept on the haystack that night. Some of the women had babies in their arms. I have never forgotten that sight." One such scene as that would be sufficient to impress it indelibly in any boy's mind.

Both of the cabin homes in which Abraham Lincoln lived in Kentucky were on the old Cumberland Road leading from Louisville to Nashville, Tennessee. Over this road many of the slaves grown in Kentucky were driven to the southern cotton markets, and Abraham Lincoln, as a boy, must have observed these people herded much the same as cattle and driven along the public highway.

It was probably such sights as he saw on the old Cumberland Road which gave him an intense hatred for slave dealers, as far as we know the only class which Lincoln singled out for his condemnation.

At Peoria on October 15, 1854, he said, "You have among you a sneaking individual of the class of native tyrant, known as the 'Slave Dealer.' He watches your necessities and crawls up to buy your slave at a speculative price. If you cannot help it you sell to him; but if you can help it you drive him from your door. You utterly despise him. You do not recognize him as your friend or even as an honest man. Your children must not play with his; they may rollick freely with the little negroes, but not with the slave dealer's children."

Not far from the school Lincoln attended on Knob Creek was Atherton's Ferry. Here Lincoln observed slaves at work, as Atherton listed as many as eight slaves in the year 1816. The early biographers of the President have contended vigorously that Abraham Lincoln's father saw little or nothing of slavery while living in Kentucky. Of course, this would imply that Abraham Lincoln, himself, seldom came in contact with it. The following paragraph from Beveridge's work supports the opinions of early writers:

"Not the faintest evidence has been found indicating that slavery was so much as a contributing cause of their departure; indeed, it is doubtful whether that institution made any impression one way or another, on Thomas Lincoln's pallid mind."¹⁹

Beveridge's source of information was Herndon who claimed that:

"In all Hardin County—at that time a large area of territory—there were not over fifty slaves and it is doubtful if he saw enough of slavery to fill him with the righteous opposition to the institution with which he has so frequently been credited."²⁰

Why William Herndon should make such statements as he did about the extent of slavery in Kentucky during Lincoln's boyhood is a mystery. If he had desired to know the truth about the matter, there were

19. Beveridge, Abraham Lincoln, Vol. 1, p. 33.

20. Herndon, Lincoln, Vol. 1, p. 20.

plenty of records available so that he need not have done any guessing about it. In fact he might have reviewed the history of his own family and been better informed about the question.

William Herndon was born in Green County, Kentucky, the county adjacent to the one in which Lincoln was born. His uncle, William Herndon, for whom it may be assumed the partner of Abraham Lincoln was named, from all records available seems to have been a slave dealer. On January 17, 1811, he sold to Andrew Barnett five slaves.²¹ Another slave is recorded as having been sold by him to James Allen²¹, yet he listed for taxation in 1812 seven slaves and only 200 acres of land.²² Later a record appeared showing that William Herndon was in possession of a slave in a New Orleans jail, and he authorized an attorney, William Reach, to sell it and make a bill of sale.²³

In 1811, when Abraham Lincoln was but two years old, the tax list for Hardin County shows that there were then 1,007 slaves listed for taxation. The white male population above sixteen years of age, this same year, was 1,627. This would indicate an average of at least two slaves for each family in the county.

One slave holder in Hardin County in the year 1813 listed fifty-eight slaves for taxation—eight more than Herndon claimed existed in the whole county. Denton Geoghegan, for whom Thomas Lincoln had a contract for getting out lumber for a mill, listed twenty slaves in 1816.

In his debate with Douglas at Alton, Abraham Lincoln must have recalled his father's removal from a slave state to a free state when he said: "How many Democrats are there about here who have left slave states and come into the free state of Illinois to get rid of the institution of slavery?" One voice interrupted here and said a thousand, another added one thousand and one, to which Lincoln responded, "I reckon there are a thousand and one."

As a final word about the slavery condition in Kentucky during the period of the Lincolns' residence in the state and the slavery agitation which contributed to Thomas Lincoln's desire to move, a paragraph from Spencer is timely, not for what it observes, but for what it fails to comprehend:

"The Emancipation movements accomplished little or no good and a vast amount of evil. It disturbed the Baptist churches in Kentucky for a period of thirty years. It rent asunder many of the churches, stirred up the bad passions of the people, gendered a spirit of insubordination among slaves, and almost entirely destroyed the influence and usefulness of a number of excellent preachers."²⁴

Possibly this agitation did make some far-reaching contribution, unknown to Spencer, which found full expression in the life of a growing boy who was born and lived in the very midst of the turmoil. It is doubtful if there is any other spot on the American continent which saw more of the anti-slavery controversy previous to the year 1816 than Hardin County, Kentucky.

21. Green County Court Deed Book 6, p. 179.

21. *Ibid*, p. 259.

22. Green County Court Commission Tax Book for 1812, Archives of Kentucky State Historical Society.

23. Green County Court Deed Book 9, p. 14.

24. Spencer, p. 187.

III. LINCOLN'S EARLY REACTION TOWARDS THE MORAL ISSUE IN SLAVERY

If we could know all of the factors which contributed to the preparing of Abraham Lincoln for the task assigned him in the year 1860, we would conclude without doubt that the one event of most importance in his early years was the removal from a slave state to a free state. Lincoln crossing the Ohio River in 1816 may have been as important an event in the annals of American history as Washington crossing the Delaware.

For ten years after leaving Kentucky, Abraham Lincoln could have seen but little of slavery, and he was also out from under the continual agitation of the question. During this period the only memories of the slavery conditions in his old home would be a few of the more outstanding instances when extreme cruelty or injustice towards slaves had left a deep impression on his child mind.

With the change of location of the Lincoln home it was not long before there came a change in the personnel of the family itself. When Abraham was but nine years of age his mother died, and a year later a stepmother, Sarah Bush Johnston, came to take her place.

It is difficult to learn just what was his stepmother's attitude towards the slavery question. While it does not appear as if her father, Christopher Bush, was an owner of slaves, on one occasion he did have one laboring for him whose services he had hired. Sarah's first husband had been too poor to own slaves even if he had been inclined to do so. However, she had been brought up in Elizabethtown when both Carman and Dodge, the anti-slavery preachers, had served the congregation there.

Such information as Lincoln was able to gather about slavery during the early Indiana days must have come to him through books and newspapers or discussions which may have taken place at the various schools he attended. There may have been some sermons in the church on the slavery question, but it was no longer a point of controversy among the members.

Some time during his early life he is said to have read "Riley's Narrative," a book describing the adventures of a crew that was shipwrecked on the African coast. In this instance the white sailors were made slaves by the Africans, which was the reverse of the race dominance question in Kentucky. This must have greatly impressed Lincoln, and probably was the basis of one of his arguments relating to race superiority.

The newspapers which came to the community were the most fruitful sources of information about what was going on with respect to the slavery question. Some of the articles in the *Vincennes Sun* which Lincoln must have seen appeared under the following captions: The Abolition of Slavery, Colonization, Fugitive Slave Law in Indiana, Horrors of Slavery, Slavery Paragraph in Declaration of Independence, Position of Henry Clay on Slavery, etc.²⁵

25. See Files of *Vincennes Sun*, State Library, Indianapolis.

One of the most important social experiments carried out in the western country was the Owen's Colony at New Harmony. Robert Owen is known to have been opposed to slavery and became in later years one of the champions of emancipation. Lincoln must have been influenced somewhat indirectly by this colony, although we have been unable to find any reference he ever made to this group.

Although living in a free state, we are not to assume that one residing so close to the Kentucky border would fail to come in contact, from time to time, with slavery. He wrote to his friend, Speed, in 1855: "I confess I hate to see the poor creatures hunted down and caught and carried back to their stripes and unrequited toil, but I bite my lips and be quiet."²⁶ It is possible that early scenes he observed along the Ohio were responsible for his reference to these runaway slaves.

When Lincoln was seventeen years of age he went to work for a ferry keeper on the banks of the Ohio River, and again had an opportunity to observe slavery at work. Some new slants on the institution were noticed at this time which he had not had occasion to observe before. Possibly one of the most disturbing factors was the growth of the slave traffic as indicated by the great number of negroes who were shipped to southern plantations.

Lincoln's reaction towards the scenes he must have witnessed on the Ohio River while working at Troy is set forth in a letter written to his friend, Joshua Speed, in which he recalled an incident on a boat trip which he made with Speed in 1840, about fifteen years after his employment by Taylor at the mouth of Anderson River on the Ohio. He said:

"You may remember as well as I do that from Louisville to the mouth of the Ohio there were on board ten or a dozen slaves shackled together with irons. That sight was a continual torment to me, and I see something like it every time I touch the Ohio or any other slave border. It is not fair for you to assume that I have no interest in a thing which has, and continually exercises, the power of making me miserable."²⁷

Lincoln's river experience as a ferryman paved the way for his being engaged as a flatboatman. In 1828 he assisted in the construction of a boat at Rockport, a few miles south from where he had been working for Taylor. He piloted this boat to New Orleans that same year. For some unknown reason this trip which Lincoln made while still a youth has been overshadowed by the trip he made later on while residing in Illinois. He gives an account of this first trip in his autobiographical sketch, written in the third person, as follows:

"He was a hired hand merely, and he and a son of the owner, without other assistance, made the trip. The nature of part of the 'cargo-load,' as it was called, made it necessary for them to linger and trade along the sugar-coast; and one night they were attacked by seven negroes with intent to kill and rob them. They were hurt some in the melee, but succeeded in driving the negroes from the boat, and then 'cut cable,' 'weighed anchor,' and left."²⁸

This dramatic episode, which was a personal experience, was recited at the expense of anything of interest he may have observed at New Orleans. According to Beveridge, the trip "gave a new experience to the

26. Letter to Joshua F. Speed, August 24, 1855.

27. Ibid.

28. Autobiographical Sketch Prepared for Scripps.

two youths from the backwoods of Indiana, but there is no evidence of the impression made upon Lincoln by this, his second contact with slavery."²⁹ Here again Beveridge seems to have been influenced by the Herndon manuscripts to make another conclusion which is in contradiction to a written statement by Abraham Lincoln himself.

Lincoln makes no mention whatever of any incident that happened on the second trip to New Orleans with the exception of recalling the fact that "Hanks had not gone to New Orleans, but, having a family and being likely to be detained from home longer than at first expected, had turned back from St. Louis." Yet Herndon claims John Hanks was responsible for the story that "In New Orleans, for the first time Lincoln beheld the true horrors of human slavery. He saw negroes in chains—whipped and scourged."³⁰ Strange to say, however, the traditional reaction of Lincoln towards the slave markets on this latter visit is related by Hanks whom Lincoln says did not make the trip. This discrepancy drives us to the conclusion that it was on the eventful first trip that he saw the slave markets of New Orleans which so impressed him.

This assumption is supported by a letter which Abraham Lincoln wrote to Alexander Stephens on January 9, 1860: "When a boy I went to New Orleans on a flatboat, and there I saw slavery and slave markets as I have never seen them in Kentucky, and I heard worse of the Red River plantations." Since Lincoln made this trip to New Orleans on which he observed the slave market "when a boy," it must have been on the first instead of the second trip that he was so deeply impressed with what he saw there.

We can now conclude that long before Lincoln visited his wife's people at Lexington, Kentucky, he had some very decided notions about the wrongs of slavery. At least a dozen years before he visited Joshua Speed at Louisville and witnessed the scene mentioned by Nicolay and Hay, and at least three years before his river trip from Illinois to New Orleans he had witnessed the horrors of slavery, remembering, however, as he clearly implies in this letter to Stevens, the slavery conditions in Kentucky when he was a child.

In the comparatively brief autobiographical sketch, prepared for Scripps, Lincoln thought the protest with reference to slavery, in which he joined with Dan Stone, of sufficient importance to be printed in full, and he prefaced it with this paragraph:

"March 3, 1837, by a protest entered upon the 'Illinois House Journal' of that date, at pages 817 and 818, Abraham, with Dan Stone, another representative of Sangamon, briefly defined his position on the slavery question; and so far as it goes, it was then the same that it is now."

Then followed the protest:

"Resolutions upon the subject of domestic slavery having passed both branches of the General Assembly at its present session, the undersigned hereby protest against the passage of the same.

29. Beveridge, Vol. 1, p. 88.

30. Herndon, Vol. 1, p. 75.

"They believe that the institution of slavery is founded on both injustice and bad policy, but that the promulgation of abolition doctrines tends rather to increase than abate its evils.

"They believe that the Congress of the United States has no power under the Constitution to interfere with the institution of slavery in the different states.

"They believe that the Congress of the United States has the power, under the Constitution, to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia, but that the power ought not to be exercised, unless at the request of the people of the District.

"The difference between these opinions and those contained in the said resolutions is their reason for entering this protest.

"DAN STONE,
"ABRAHAM LINCOLN,

"Representatives from the County of Sangamon."

When Abraham Lincoln prepared and signed this protest which was purely voluntary, he was but twenty-eight years old, and he clearly stated at that time that he believed that "the institution of slavery is founded on both injustice and bad policy." In June, 1860, he affirmed that the above statement "briefly defined his position on the slavery question" as far as it goes in 1860 as well as in 1837.

Some authors have thought because Lincoln did not wage a relentless campaign against slavery during his early political efforts that he was not much concerned about the system. We have Lincoln's own testimony, made in Chicago, on July 10, 1858, as to why he was inactive in the early days in any movement against slavery. He says:

"I have always hated it, but I have always been quiet about it until this new era of the introduction of the Nebraska bill began. I always believed that everybody was against it, and that it was in course of ultimate extinction."

A study of the slavery atmosphere of Lincoln's youth and observations of his different reactions at intervals during his life, allows one to conclude, that the brief excerpt from the letter to Hodges of Kentucky in 1864, used in the introduction of this paper, states most clearly his own and indirectly his parents' appraisal of slavery:

"I am naturally anti-slavery. If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. I cannot remember when I did not so think and feel."



